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## Yes, Virginia, there is a mine inspector

By Dennis Welch  
Tribune

Even today, the state mine inspector worries about getting shot by old prospectors thinking he's come to jump their claims. While it's not as dangerous as 100 years ago - the office only has one vehicle with bullet holes in it now - it's still a peculiar hazard that comes with one of the state's top elected offices.

That's right, the state mine inspector ranks among the highest elected positions in Arizona. It's one of only six offices state voters decide. But the others - including the governor, attorney general and secretary of state - are less likely to take fire on the desolate back roads of Arizona's mining country.

Arizona is the only state that elects it's mine inspector. Yet the race goes virtually unnoticed every four years.

But voters might want to pay more attention this year, considering the mine inspector oversees a \$3.3 billion industry and works on the front lines of illegal immigration, the war on drugs and the war on terrorism.

Plus, for the the first time in nearly two decades, the state will have a new inspector. Doug Martin, first elected in 1988, is leaving office because of term limits.

That's started a cutthroat battle between two GOP candidates - one, a lifelong miner and federal safety inspector, the another a former state legislator and consummate political insider who last worked in a mine almost three decades ago.

Whatever the outcome, the victor will be taking over an office that's been rocked by scandal.

Currently, the state is wrapping up an investigation of the department after a former employee alleged fraud and financial mismanagement.

The problems have left some people asking: Why does the state still go through the trouble of electing a mine inspector?

HISTORY

The primary job of the state mine inspector has always been simple: Keep the mines safe. But back in 1911 when the state's founders were crafting a constitution, the industry wasn't exactly a bedrock for safety.

Working as a miner here just might have been one of the deadliest jobs on the planet.

Back then, thousands of miners died annually in Arizona. The mine inspector was charged to change that and to generally improve safety underground. That often meant going toe-to-toe with powerful mining interests.

So the founders felt the position needed to be free from the enormous political influence wielded by the mining industry - which might resist many of the costly safety reforms that cut into its bottom line.

They decided the mine inspector should be elected by the people and not appointed by politicians beholden to the mining companies.

"They didn't want a mining inspector to be replaced by an elected official who caved under the pressure of mining officials," said Martin, who has spent a lot of time learning about the history of the office he has held since 1989.

Martin has also collected plenty of stories of inspectors being shot at by grizzled prospectors in the more remote regions of the state.

But a lot has changed since the state's Wild West days. The office has taken an everexpanding role with illegal immigration, the wars on drugs and terrorism.

Today, there are more than 120,000 abandoned mines in Arizona. They make perfect hideouts, Martin said, for people whose game is either mischief or terror.

"Look, they are a lot nicer than the caves these guys are used to back in Iraq," Martin said.

He added that many of these old mines are located near vital infrastructure facilities. In particular, he said there's one within sight of the West Valley's Palo Verde nuclear plant, the largest in the country.

Martin fears that the old mines would work as bunkers and lookouts for terrorists armed with rockets. That's why the inspector job is more important today than ever, he said.

Each year, more than 452 million tons of explosives move through the state destined for one Arizona's 876 open mines. The mining industry also uses millions of gallons of sulfuric acid in leaching operations across the state.

Inside some abandoned mines, Martin and other inspectors have found stray explosives, books on how to build bombs and even blueprints of city electrical grids and how to blow them up.

They've also found illegal immigrants and even methamphetamine labs - not exactly the kinds of things the state founders had in mind when they created the inspector's job.

## INVESTIGATION

The mine inspector normally works under the public radar, but a recent probe has raised the level of scrutiny.

The calls to change the mine inspector from an elected to an appointed position grew louder this year after the state launched an audit of the office.

The investigation was spurred by a complaint from a temporary employee who accused the office of mishandling funds.

Alan Ecker, a spokesman for the Arizona Department of Administration, said the findings of the investigation will be released by the end of the month.

Among the allegations investigators are looking into:

- Financial accounts kept in unauthorized banks.
- Five vehicles leased outside the motor pool.
- There are 16 vehicles leased for 10 employees.
- The agency is paying for two residential phone lines, including one at Martin's house.
- Donations made to organizations such as the ASU Foundation and the Maricopa County's Sheriff's Office.

Rep. Bob Robson, R-Chandler, said there would be more oversight and accountability if the office were appointive.

"This is a position that is much more administrative than anything," Robson said. If it was an appointed position, Robson said state officials could look at each candidate's qualifications and determine who is best for the job. As it stands now, voters, who have little knowledge of the candidates - and, in some cases, little regard - are left to decide.

However, Sen. Thayer Verschoor, R-Gilbert, disagrees. He said voters should decide, based on the same reasons outlined by the state's founders.

Regardless, this year's race for mine inspector promises to be hard-fought between two completely different Republican candidates.

Larry Nelson, 70, a Mesa resident and former federal mine inspector, says he's anything but a politician. And his resume backs it up.

Nelson has worked in the mining industry for the past 50 years. He's never held a political office and says he doesn't seek campaign endorsements.

## NO POLITICIAN

He first started working in mines in 1956 in Superior. Nearly 20 years later, he took a job as a federal mine inspector after one of his friends was killed in a mining accident.

He's been a regulator ever since, which hasn't made him many friends in the industry.

"I've been in enforcement for so long you could say I'm not the most popular guy," he said.

By contrast, his opponent Joe Hart, 62, has spent most of his adult life in politics - and very little in the mines. His skills are much different than Martin's, he said.

Hart, who owns two radio stations and three television stations, is a former state legislator who has received official endorsements from nearly every Republican lawmaker in the state.

Sydney Hay, who lobbies for Arizona Mining and Industry Gets Our Support, said the organization "would be very excited if (Hart) wins." Still, the organization didn't officially endorse Hart.

Unlike other statewide elected positions, the mine inspector needs to meet specific background requirements to show experience in the field.

The mine inspector must have worked in a mine for at least seven years, including four in underground mines.

Hart hasn't worked in a mine since 1983, when the Duval mine in Kingman shut down. And officials at that mine said it's always been an open-pit operation, meaning there's never been underground mining there.

But that's OK, Hart said, because he worked in underground mines when he was a child.

So why would a successful businessman who hasn't worked in the industry for three decades want the state's top mining job, which pays \$40,000 year? "I just want to give something back. The mines have raised me and my kids," he said.

Hart said his experience at the Legislature makes him a better candidate because he knows how to get things done.

"The problem with my opponent is that he spent too much time in the mines," he said.



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